

FOREST FIRE IN EATON

AUGUST 1877



Echo of Peshtigo

1877 Fire Devastated Eaton

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Forest fires no longer concern farmers of Brown County, but 90 or more years ago they were a constant summer threat pioneer settlers had learned to live with, albeit uneasily. While the Green Bay area largely escaped the huge destruction of such conflagrations as Peshtigo in 1871, there were times when fires in the woods posed dangers and loss of property — like the one that swept over the Town of Eaton in August of 1877.

The Eaton blaze could have been more deadly than it was. Indeed, for a time, rumors flying about the city had loss of property and life so great that relief efforts were getting under way in a welter of accusations between the responsibilities of the county board and the city. Meanwhile, the actual sufferers were caught in the middle.

The summer of 1877 in Northeastern Wisconsin was much similar to the conditions that led to the destruction of Peshtigo six years before. Very little rain fell, swamps dried up and the water level in streams and wells ran dangerously low. Even in the city the threat was great, and a series of spectacular blazes in July pointed up the fact.

Kept Eye Cocked

While citizens avidly followed the Russo-Turkish War, the Nez Perce Indian uprising in the west, the great railroad strike that exploded in the historic Haymarket riot in Chicago and the Pensaukee tornado, they also kept an apprehensive eye cocked on the immediate horizon. A severe fire in the Brussels region in July gave them added reason for unease.

All through July there had been reports of fires in the surrounding woods, and during the last two weeks of the month the eastern sky was lit at night by a red glow. Many of these fires had been started by farmers themselves, particularly a group of newly arrived Polish immigrants who had settled in the Town of Eaton, around the settlement now known as Poland, and were busily engaged in clearing land for their small holdings. These newcomers had not been around in 1871 and thought they could keep their own bonfires under control.

August 4, 1877, was a Saturday, and that night Green Bay residents noted a particularly bright conflagration under way in the east. All day Sunday a heavy pall of smoke stifled the town with smoke and ashes, including occasional falls of burned leaves.

Flood of Rumors

Exactly what was going on wasn't known, however, until Sunday night when a party of men from Montpelier in Kewaunee County arrived. They reported forest fires so bad in Eaton it was impossible to get through and that they had had to make a long detour via Cooperstown in Manitowoc County.

Not far behind them came a trickle of refugees from the burning area with harrowing tales. In nothing flat the town was boiling with rumors of burning buildings, crops destroyed, cattle dead in the fields and heavy loss of life.

Nothing definite was learned until Monday morning when more refugees began to come in. Then it was discovered that the whole central portion of the town of Eaton had been desolated between Saturday afternoon and Monday morning.

Started on Sunday

As nearly as the stories could be sorted out, fires which had been burning for weeks in the vicinity of Cook's sawmill in the eastern portion of Eaton blazed up again about 10 a.m. Sunday. From a point about 19 miles east of Green Bay the fire swept west before a strong breeze.

Polish immigrant farms just being cleared were overwhelmed first, then the fire cleaned out a settlement of some 15 buildings at a place called Benjamin's Mill, where all but one of the houses was destroyed. When it hit the Benjamin's Mill area the fire was cutting a swathe about two miles wide, then it branched out into two or three lanes that together covered an area about nine miles in width.

West of the mill the area had been occupied for considerable time by a settlement of Danish farmers, and here the fire got its first check, since the land had been pretty well cleared of trees. Nevertheless, numerous farm buildings were destroyed before the fire began to peter out, a process completed late Monday by the first real rains the region had enjoyed in weeks.

Rallied to Help

In Green Bay, as the extent of the disaster became evident — in fact, for a time it was believed to be even worse than it actually turned out to be — citizens assembled in a mass meeting on Tuesday to organize relief work. Sen. Tim Howe was named chairman with Dwight I. Follett as secretary, and a committee consisting of Charles Berner, Capt. W. R. Bourne and R. Schwarz appointed to visit the area and report back.

Before the session was over it got into an acrimonious discussion of just whose responsibility it was to help, many feeling that the county board had a stake in the work, too. The sight of fire-blackened, frightened refugees, many of whom couldn't speak English carried the day, however, and the work went ahead.

Eventually it was determined that the fire hadn't been as serious as first feared, although bad enough. No lives were lost, a few persons were injured but much property had been destroyed. Heaviest losers were the Polish immigrants whose forest-surrounded clearings took the brunt of the fire.

Altogether about 30 families were completely burned out, with losses estimated between \$12,000 and \$17,000. For the poor Polish farmers the destruction was complete and they were destitute.

As usual in such disasters, there were examples of miraculous escapes and odd turns of fate. Several farmers suffered the unusual experience of removing all their furniture from houses into open fields, only to have their goods destroyed while the buildings were untouched.

A Mrs. Peterson arrived in town atop a farm wagon loaded with what she could salvage from her threatened home. The only reason she got out was because one horse of her team panicked, dragged its mate and the wagon right through the worst of the surrounding blaze and made it. The horses' backs were blistered but the wagon was unhurt, as were seven Polish farmers who had hung onto the vehicle and been dragged or ran with it to safety.

By the time the showers put the fire out a large section of woods for miles between Suamico and Pensaukee had been charred or burned out. The whole thing had its bright side, though, since the fire cleared land quickly that would otherwise have required months of backbreaking labor. The pioneers went back, rebuilt their destroyed homes and barns, and in a short time the area was prosperous farm land.